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Vote no on gerrymandering

A Montgomery County Democrat makes the case against Maryland's congressional district maps

By Phil Andrews

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Whenever proponents of Maryland's new congressional districts make their pitch, there is something missing: the map itself. The gerrymandered map of Maryland's congressional districts produced by Gov. Martin O'Malley and a majority of the General Assembly is so outrageous that proponents of the new map are embarrassed to show it in public. That's because when most people see the map and its bizarrely shaped districts, they cannot believe that anyone in their right mind would have voted for it.

Maryland's new Third Congressional District, represented by Congressman John Sarbanes, a Baltimore County Democrat, is so disjointed it looks like blood spatter from a crime scene

(www.planning.maryland.gov/PDF/Redistricting/2010maps/Cong/Dist_3.pdf). The district not only requires state-of-the-art GPS to navigate but a good boat to cross from peninsula tip to peninsula tip in its southeastern portion. Towson, Annapolis and parts of Silver Spring are in the district, while most of the communities between are not. No elected official can adequately represent a district such as District 3, whose boundaries are impossible to decipher, much less remember.

Marylanders can and should repeal this outrageous gerrymander in November by voting against Question 5, effectively sending politicians in Annapolis the message: "return to sender." It's a message that the governor and most members of the General Assembly sorely need to hear. It's a message they ignored last fall when the League of Women Voters, Common Cause of Maryland, civil rights groups, legislators of both major parties, former U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, and editorial boards of newspapers blasted this gerrymander.

Fortunately, Maryland's constitution provides the right for a referendum on recently enacted state laws, and many people across the political spectrum worked hard to gather the more than 56,000 signatures needed to place the new congressional map on the ballot. That's why the fate of this gerrymander is now in the hands of Maryland's voters.

The new congressional map is fundamentally flawed. It unnecessarily moves more than a million Marylanders to different congressional districts for purely political reasons. It unnecessarily divides communities of interest — even neighborhoods — while combining other communities that have almost nothing in common. For example, the Third Congressional District includes bits and pieces of Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County, Howard County and Montgomery County, and the

Second Congressional District — almost as convoluted as the Third — also includes portions of Baltimore City and four counties. These districts couldn't be less compact or more confusing to voters.

The arguments proponents have made for the gerrymander are false or misleading. They imply that only Republicans object to the map. Then, why did the Democratic Party in Montgomery County refuse to support it, despite lobbying from the governor on down? They claim that the districts must look like they do to maximize chances for a Democratic pickup in the Sixth Congressional District. But that argument doesn't explain why the Third Congressional District sprawls from Towson to White Oak to Annapolis. They say that Democrats should gerrymander here because Republicans are gerrymandering elsewhere, even though they know that if Marylanders repeal the map, the 2012 congressional election results will still stand, and Democrats will still control the redistricting process. They say that the map is legal but ignore whether it is right for politicians to choose their own voters. They say the courts have upheld the map but fail to acknowledge the toothless standards regarding compactness and splitting communities, resulting in district boundaries that are irrational and disenfranchising to voters of all affiliations.

Instead of continuing the cycle of gerrymandering that occurs after every 10-year census, Maryland's lawmakers need to get out of the business of redistricting and support the establishment of a truly independent redistricting commission as Arizona, California and Iowa have done. Although this essential reform will be extremely difficult to achieve in a General Assembly that has demonstrated little interest in political reform for years, it might happen if voters resoundingly reject the egregious gerrymander foisted on them by the governor and their representatives in Annapolis.

Marylanders will be stuck with this atrocious congressional gerrymander for 10 years unless voters repeal it by voting against Question 5. This would return the map to its Annapolis senders, require the governor and General Assembly to go back to the drawing board, and help move the needle in Annapolis from politics as usual to reform.

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